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Language is a Public Thing

Yuliya Komska and Michelle Moyd

ABSTRACT Manifestos have resurfaced as fuel for firing political imaginations and calling people to action in a threatening time. But what can they really accomplish? A rethinking of the limitations of manifestos—their panic-driven contexts, their emphasis on collectivities rather than individuals, the vagueness and combativeness of their language—suggests that there may be other more fruitful ways of instilling care of and for language in everyday life and politics. With due deference to Orwell for his focus on the political dangers of not caring for language, we posit that his prescriptions can also inhibit our abilities to communicate in productive ways, across disparate communities that might stand to gain from breaking out of strictures on political language and expression. Inspired by Arendt's call to "think what we are doing," we propose as a starting point a language charter that will make language everyone's business.

Part I. Against Manifestos

Manifestos are experiencing a rebirth. Some spur or foreground ongoing civic mobilization. Others claim to counter the perceived threats that civic mobilization generates.¹

From a figurehead of an artistic movement known for its commitment to utter nonsense comes perhaps the truest, briefest, and most candid assessment of how a manifesto works and why it fails. "To launch a manifesto," wrote the Dadaist Tristan Tzara,

you have to want: A. B. & C., and fulminate against 1, 2, & 3, work yourself up and sharpen your wings to conquer and circulate lower and upper case As, Bs & Cs, sign, shout, swear, organize prose into a form that is absolutely and irrefutably obvious, prove its ne plus ultra and maintain that novelty resembles life.²

The manifesto was a grandiloquent, formulaic, presumptuous, rage-filled, and ultimately futile genre, Tzara offered. And yet, of course, he went on to pen yet another iteration of it—the Dada's second, at that. How could he not? The year was 1918, and the world had stopped making sense to many. The manifesto lured with the etymological promise to make things evident, clear.

Exactly one hundred years on, a political storm system of comparable proportions is lashing the coastline of the present. Again, nothing makes sense. And again, the manifesto is calling.

Is the call worth resisting? We argue that it is. Despite its many transformations, the fitful, rushed, revolution-fixated culture of manifesto-ing has not translated into sustainable use. The genre and its variations have outlived their purpose, making room for other forms of covenant that are more inclusive, open-ended, solidary, moral, ethical, introspective, long-lasting, binding, and action-oriented. Where the issue is language—consistently fetishized and just as consistently neglected—such alternatives are a necessity.

The following myths lay out some of the reasons for the shift away from the manifesto, lest it appear as an offhand dismissal of a genre.

The myth of wiping the slate clean. Manifestos traffic in deconstructive or even destructive propositions. They tell us that we need to change something, improve something, redirect something—often forgetting to take note of what, if anything, is worthy of preservation or what might already exist to move things forward. Some take it to extremes, espousing the language of purges and purity. Tommaso Marinetti’s “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” a classic example, speaks of war as “the world’s only hygiene.”³ Other rallying cries anticipate visceral tears in the social fabric. In one of the best-known of the genre, “The Communist Manifesto,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels speak of a “most radical rupture” with the established patterns of the bourgeois order.⁴ Manifestos, to borrow from Marinetti and his artist kin again, pit “futurism” against “passeism,” as if abolishing the past itself or wiping the slate clean were viable options.⁵

Conversely, manifestos can be throwbacks to pasts that never were or, worse, pasts that ought to be consigned to memory for good. Even then, they are mislabeled as forward-looking missives. In March 2017, to name an example, the neo-Nazi Vanguard America’s so-called “Vanguard Manifesto” appealed to “the immutable truths of Blood and Soil” to “preserv[e] and uphol[d] the natural order that binds us,” i.e., the racist order.⁶ Sliding back in time, the writ conveniently seized Emersonian “self-reliance” from the individual, for whom it had originally been intended, and attached it to a collective.⁷

The myth of the pre-existing collective. Preempting a collective is the manifesto’s other weakness. The first person plural prevails, presuming that the “we” is already existent and not merely emergent, as is usually the case.⁸ (Or, to take an Arendtian view, that individuals are *plural*, acting in different capacities when they enter and leave different spaces, whether literal or figurative.)⁹ Manifestos thus carry on as doubly utopian fantasies: they fathom some radical rupture, then conjure up the phantom community behind it. Covering up the community’s actual absence, usually poorly, are the overstated references to the Other—that is, the opposition to be toppled. For Marx and Engels it is the bourgeoisie. For the fascist Vanguard America, it is the imaginary “Jew” of global capitalism. The “we,” it follows, is defined not positively, in descriptions of what it is, but negatively, in lists of what it is not. Who are “we”? The question remains up in the air, just as the vaunted community, fuzzy and elusive, lacks personal commitment on behalf of those who are not the manifesto’s author(s).

Collective action is undoubtedly among the highest of pursuits in troubled times. The promotion of collective ideology over conscience, however, leaves little room for individual responsibility, or even for the first-person singular as a committed, interested actor. Any ideology, writes Václav Havel, only resembles “the repository of something supra-personal and objective” but really “enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position [. . .] from both the world and from themselves.”¹⁰

In short, manifestos don’t commit anyone to doing anything, although exceptions are not out of the question. Naomi Klein’s “The Leap Manifesto” has drawn thousands of individual and collective online signatories, all of whom pledge to act in the interest of environmental sustainability and to intervene in the processes that have created the destructive juggernaut known as climate change.¹¹ Still, their high number poses the question of what this volume of signatures means in the age of the online petition, when expression of solidarity is an easy click away. Petition-signing leaves one with the illusion of having acted, whereas proper action demands the sacrifice of many individuals’ time and labor.

The myth of clear weaponized language. Manifestos' common formulas, at which Tzara's parody hints, converge on demands and wishes but offer, all too often, few practical pieces of advice about the steps to be taken. Vagueness pervades them. One example is "we demand" and "we want" in "The Leap Manifesto," which starts with the premise that "Canada is facing the deepest crisis in recent memory," evident in environment, labor, indigenous rights, infrastructure, and agriculture. The chorus on whose behalf Klein writes must "welcome refugees and migrants"; it "need[s] the right policies" for the society's sweeping transformation; and it will, at town hall meetings, "gather to democratically define what a genuine leap to the next economy means in their communities." But how exactly—and what role the moral core of the Leap agenda, i.e., the indigenous peoples of Canada get to play in the making of "whatever possible communities"—remains unannounced.¹²

Finally, manifestos often resort to metaphorical language derived from war, the "call to arms" being a foremost staple. *The History Manifesto*, for example, makes this point about history's ability to connect the past with the future: "The sword of history has two edges, one that cuts open new possibilities in the future, and one that cuts through the noise, contradictions, and lies of the past."¹³ Historians, the authors go on, must "combat the short-termism of our time" in order to help solve its thorniest conundrums.¹⁴ Taken in isolation, *The History Manifesto's* belligerent idiom is innocuous enough. But when government employees go "ballistic" and politicians routinely refer to disruptions of longstanding procedural norms as "the nuclear option," combativeness easily becomes the lowest common denominator—not to say a cornerstone—of *all* political language. And yet, what sort of individuals or communities can emerge out of combat? How whole can they be?

Part II. Make Room for Language

Language is a shared resource. Tellingly, whatever their vagueness and their debt to the generic conventions, the writings that still label themselves "manifestos" are perhaps unintentionally beginning to implode the form from within. Klein's *The Leap Manifesto* takes root in the clearly outlined values ("respect for Indigenous rights, diversity, and environmental stewardship") rather than a moral vacuum, in deep-seated indigenous knowledge rather than upended or invented paradigms, in attempted sustainability of the call itself (extended to an online petition with all individual and collective signatories' names visible) rather than its diffusion in the unknowable readers' mass. Crucial is not the genre itself but the means for harnessing civic sensibilities for the long haul.

Along similar lines, academics have also undertaken some concrete steps, forming cross-disciplinary environmentalist alliances to commit to, conduct, and archive actual research on the ties between humans and across species. These alliances leave room for individual responsibility, make plans to repair rather than simply criticize, and invoke "moral imagination" to fuel scientific and scholarly inquiry.¹⁵ Steeped in ethics, introspection, and collaboration, their pledges echo dissident charters more than manifestos.

For centuries, charters have shaped the top-down concession and protection of liberties, from England's Magna Carta (1215) to the African Charter on Human Rights and People's Rights (1981), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), and beyond. Their bottom-up history may have shorter timelines but no less meaningful consequences.

It was only in 1838 that the worker-propelled People's Charter catalyzed and sustained a movement for more democracy in Britain over nearly two decades. Since then, key has been chartism's twentieth-century turn to existing realities worthy of reanimation, instead of utopias evoked by manifestos. The seminal Cold War-era Charter 77, initiated

in Czechoslovakia in the year 1977, centered on values—human rights and civil liberties—ostensibly espoused but egregiously trampled by the state. “Many fundamental civil rights for the time being are—unhappily—in our country valid only on paper,” the text states.¹⁶ For this reason, its text, in contrast to preceding and subsequent top-down charters, consisted “in its entirety of quotations of passages from the State Constitution.”¹⁷ Arising from “the background of solidarity and friendship” and fighting the state with its own tools, Charter 77 vowed to serve “the general interest” rather than some clear-cut “opposition political activity.”¹⁸ It did not set out to be antagonistic to the state. In fact, as the signatory Václav Černý noted, “*the authorities* nicknamed it dissidence” in order to brand it as subversive and thus illicit.¹⁹ Instead, the authors of the charter were holding the state accountable for unfulfilled promises. The document, Černý explained, was “an appeal to people’s consciences and a call for words to mean what they say. What it does aspire to is to create a general awareness of the need for justice for all, and to encourage citizens to voice this demand. [. . .] Its aim is to shake consciousnesses, not the constitution. Its strength is derived solely from the morality of its cause in the face of lies, subterfuge, manipulation of people and the hegemony of police power.”²⁰

Being both “partly forgotten” and “alive and well” is Charter 77’s paradoxical legacy. It didn’t depose Czechoslovakia’s government, and neither did it seek to. However, it did break the wave of resignation and cynicism about to submerge the citizenry and created “a civil society composed not of ideological adherents but of [truth-seeking] individuals.”²¹ Leaning into self-scrutiny, awareness, quiet morality, the emphasis on the language of rights as a shared resource, and away from the much louder panic, seizure of power, and pathos of lofty ideals, this brand of chartism has outlived the Cold War. It inspired activists the world over, including those who authored one of the most significant civic documents of our time, China’s Charter 08.²² The circumstances of its fruition were strikingly familiar. Like Czechoslovakia prior to 1977, China “signed two important international human rights conventions [in 1998]; in 2004 it amended its constitution to include the phrase ‘respect and protect human rights’; and [. . .] in 2008, it has promised to promote a ‘national human rights action plan.’” “Unfortunately,” the late Liu Xiaobo and his fellow dissidents summed up, “most of this political progress has extended no further than the paper on which it is written.” Changing a system with a “constitution but no constitutional government” was “no longer optional,” they ventured.

Chartism may seem too modest, unambitious, conciliatory, and amorphous. It can come across as regenerative more than generative, per se: it recycles instead of creating something anew. For the same reasons, however, it might be *the* much-needed sober, realistic, and, again, sustainable mode for communicating across social divides and polarities and for putting “civic spirit into practice,” per Charter 08—in the interest of all.

How to apply this to language? Much like human dignity, language is “not bestowed by the state,” to quote the Charter 08 signatories. Unlike human dignity, language must first be acquired from some second party that is, as a rule, private: a family member, a neighbor, a caretaker. The polity’s deferred intervention in its citizenry’s linguistic lives is especially palpable in the United States, which—too few people seem to realize—lacks a nation-wide official language (or languages) and an attendant national language policy.²³ Only select states, thirty-one and counting, have succeeded in legalizing some such measures.

By and large, as many rightly point out, the national language-policy vacuum has been a boon, and the reasons are simple enough. Whenever the question of language appears on the nation’s political agenda, the discussions inevitably drift toward discriminatory English-only laws that will potentially violate minorities’ labor rights and hamper their opportunities for educational advancement.²⁴ From the Founding Fathers (John Adams’ attempt to create an English-language academy in 1780, Benjamin Franklin’s well-known

anxieties over the predominance of German in Pennsylvanian politics, and Noah Webster's fretting over the distinction between British and American Englishes) to the so-called Sedition Act of 1918 (Pub.L. 65–150, 40 Stat. 553) and the many Congressional votes on language matters, the emphasis has been on the restrictive and exclusive use of the *(American) English language* rather than the enfranchising and inclusive use of *civic* or *public language*.

Are these two not the same thing? Should they be? Why? And by what means? Is America's public language (as little as such a thing exists) necessarily a monolingual construct? Furthermore, must it be English? Where do other individual language rights factor in, as they ought to according to Article 27 of the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights? (It reads, "[i]n those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.")²⁵ And, if America's public language *is* more than just a specific version of English, does the alternative make room for monolinguals or for those who know but do not meaningfully use other languages in their daily lives?

The uncertainty about the answers, and the fact that these questions are seldom posed outside the pages of academic journals, exposes a flip side of the supposed felicity of the nation's linguistic blind spot. The absence of a language policy also means that the citizenry talks about *language* very little even as concerns about individual *words* mount. In the limelight are Words of the Year, local and regional words threatened with endangerment, words excised from official use and research agendas by decree, the conservative and right-wing media's *ad hoc* semanticide. Meanwhile, "civic language" is hardly a catch phrase or even an item of public debate, and certainly not part of any recent "literacy" fad, which have included "computer literacy," "visual literacy," or "media literacy." The circumstance that English fails to differentiate between language *as a tongue* (on par with Spanish, Tagalog, Arabic, or others) and *a universal human faculty* only worsens the predicament.²⁶

All this, some might object, is an insurmountable obstacle to the kind of grassroots chartism that could boost America's language activism, broadly defined. Supplement "human rights" with "language," and the chartist edifice crumbles quickly—at least on American soil. How does one fight the state with its own weapons—its documented but unfulfilled commitments to language, in this case—if they don't exist? How does one use the state's language (to talk about language) if the state provides nothing to quote on the matter? How does one reanimate realities that haven't even been animated yet?

These are valid objections. Still, to suggest that a language charter is an impossibility would be to take chartism too literally. The chartist formula is much less specific and presumes, to attempt a gross reduction, two conditions. The first is that the state and the opposition share the same resource. The second is that the state's action to safeguard and foster this shared resource is inadequate or absent and thus requires a civic intervention.

Both conditions apply. Language *is* a shared resource: no matter how much people (ourselves included) wish to talk about it without as much as a mention of Trump or others like him, that would be impossible. And the government does do little or nothing to support this resource by championing a more multilingual political culture, promoting a wide variety of language-focused school curricula (from rhetoric to multilingual education), funding the development of accessible experimental learning materials, and so forth. Civil society must step in to put the public—and not just a white Anglophone public in command of a standard—back into "public language."

Though it remains unnamed thus far, this process has slowly begun. An action-conscious language of gradual covenant-building is now gaining traction, and it is chartist at its core. The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) platform provides a model for communicating in the chartist key, imbued with practicable action language, suggestions for taking action, and background policy briefs to inform it. An excerpt reads, “We have come together now because we believe it is time to forge a new covenant. We are dreamers and doers and this platform is meant to articulate some of our vision.”²⁷ Hyperlinks take the reader to six paths to action to “provide the stepping-stones and roadmaps” to their vision.²⁸ The reference to a “covenant”—a “solemn, binding agreement,” in Merriam-Webster’s definition—speaks to a level of commitment beyond what typically accompanies online petitions. The self-designation as “dreamers and doers” points to the need for long-term creativity, inclusivity, and purposefulness to address the multifaceted and deadly challenges facing black communities. Though language is not highlighted as a concern here, it is clear that the platform writers have taken great care of language in shaping the movement’s direction and goals.

With less immediacy, other new charter-like writings have begun to reflect on language as the inescapable medium of mobilization and communication—even as other mediums, with more reliance on the visual, the haptic, and the sonic, continue to play key parts. The next step is realizing that all language—not just public language (“the language we use when we discuss politics and policy”)—is a concern for all people: not only all Americans and certainly not only the elites or ethnic minorities, as is too often the case.²⁹ It is *the* cause that transcends the boundaries of education, class, race, gender, geography, profession, and, as unimaginable as this may be, political beliefs. Specific instances of language usage—and of individual tongues—will always remain a partisan issue. However, concern with language as such should not.

The present challenge is then not to aspire to save the day with sporadic rescue plans and manifestos, but seed the lasting conditions, personal and social/structural, when language is not constantly experienced as endangered.

Language is more than a tool. America’s official linguistic gap has already been noted. The public sphere, too, has perpetuated its fair share of occlusions. Despite the often detailed arguments for or against such obviously linguistic areas as semantics—the recent *45 Ways to Fight Trump* begins with a paragraph on the distinction between “opposition” and “resistance”—many of today’s blueprints for the way forward make little room for language as a proper cause.³⁰ They call on their readers to fight for justice, minority and labor rights, education, immigration, religious liberties—but not for language. To say that language remains instrumental in society is thus a double entendre. On the one hand, it acknowledges that language is an indispensable vehicle for agreement and opposition, solidarities, calls to action, claims, promises, policies, love, and hate. On the other hand, it also presumes that language is *only* a vehicle, necessitating elaborate arguments to prove that it in “itself [is] worthy of close attention.”³¹ Like an abiding holdover from the pre-Enlightenment paradigm, within which secular culture claimed little or no autonomy (from the ecclesiastical domain), currently language can always only exist in the service of something else.³² Its importance as such is not self-evident, and the belief that language won’t save us—“fretting over the state of language seems like an indulgence,” Louis Menand critically observes in *The New Yorker*—is deeply entrenched.³³

In short, language, in the singular and also in the plural, is an enticing but ultimately unpopular agenda. It is a topic that delights with quirks and amusing anecdotes, as many a blog attests.³⁴ It appeals with the promise of power, money, health, and other neoliberal “advantages,” according to the popular defenses of bi- and multilingualism.³⁵ It irritates with failings in the political arena, where it perennially remains “in a bad way,” to default to

George Orwell's formulation.³⁶ At the same time, discussions of language, even those with action as their main objective, are often seen as too theoretical, ivory-tower, remote from practice.

The abiding centrality of the word and its power to hurl entire nations into a state of existential terror has been patently obvious since Donald Trump's election. Between the oxymoronic "beautiful wall" and the hyperbolic "fire and fury," Trump's idiom has captured a great, not to say disproportionate, amount of attention. Its extensive scrutiny by linguists, translators, and journalists may have yielded some useful insights, but it has also created preconditions for linguistic amnesia with regard to everyone else's expression. The panic around Trump's idiom has so far done little to recalibrate language for all those who are not Trump, to make its shared nature obvious. And that, in turn, has failed to stave off the oncoming waves of panic about politics, international or domestic, addling thought and standing in the way of action.

Meantime, for better or worse, language remains vital to assent and dissent within all political parties, all civic responses—the protests, petitions, and data rescue—and journalism. What are the templates for envisioning sustainable language use that will serve longer-term solutions instead of flickering as one-off reactions to each day's new crises and the short-term thinking that these incessant crises and "shock events" generate? It is true that preaching is easier than practicing. But preaching, too, is a kind of practice.

After all, perhaps the most widely discussed, best-known speech acts come from oratory traditions. Though often the province of political luminaries, in the US this tradition is also linked to religious communities. One way to think about what language is and what it can do in difficult times is to think of its capacities for expressing "moral dissent"—a purposeful "look[ing] forward toward the vision of what we know we were made to be."³⁷ Setbacks will inevitably happen, but rather than experiencing these as final defeats, moral dissenters can use them to reassess their strategies and tactics.³⁸ Identifying specific shared language practices and commitments can help build enduring "fusion coalitions" that are dynamic, nimble, and responsive to sustained expression of dissent that see past the next election cycle and into an extended future of engagement and change.³⁹ Above all, it can redefine "public language" as something that is firmly in the public domain, and not something that is exclusive to politicians and policy-making per se.

Language needs long-term care and commitment. It is significant that Timothy Snyder's bestselling *On Tyranny* allots three of its twenty chapters to language care. The maxims are simple: "be kind to our language," "make eye contact and small talk," and "listen for dangerous words."⁴⁰ Each gestures towards the everyday language choices that inform human interactions, well outside elite political or academic circles. They matter precisely because they are the stuff of building communities, coalitions, collectives that may be rooted in neighborhoods, workplaces, public spaces, associational life, arts venues, and so on. Snyder's book is not a manifesto: importantly, it is a self-help manual for those trying to resist in their myriad small ways, including through conscious language choices that refuse to let the state into their most intimate, communal, social, and activist spaces. These are also the spaces where organizing happens, away from the authorities' scrutiny, away from the bombast of official and corporate messaging, away from the chaos of the twenty-four-hour news cycle that is so unkind to language, and so complicit in its reckless use.⁴¹

After Trump's failure to condemn racist violence across the US alienated some Republican voters in the summer of 2017, the everyday language choices are also theirs to pursue. The reality of language care is no longer about manifesto-style proclamations for niche

audiences or vocabularies handed from the top down but the question of what words (or, in the case of sign language, gestures or facial expressions) to choose, why, where, and when—and how to string them into thoughts that make sense to more than their originator. It is a reality where the balance between self-help (or self-reliance) and community-building is of the essence.

The task here is to outline and commit to a practice of language that avoids the pathos, the needless inflation of concepts (of the “call to arms” variety), the trite metaphors, the inertia, the unaccountability for the spoken. If militancy does have a place in the suggested routines—memorably, renowned Kenyan author, scholar, and activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has described himself as a “language warrior” standing up for a versatile “languageverse”—it is a lasting, perhaps lifelong mission that requires focus.⁴² It is not a question of signing a petition and forgetting.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, or “committing a social science crime” by ignoring those who have long been engaged in everyday language care, it is important to recognize the disruptive potential of language work that has gone on below the radar all along.⁴³ Indigenous language preservation efforts, to cite an example, provide resources for Native American multilingualism in the face of encroaching monolingualism and English hegemony.⁴⁴ Linguists continue to study and advocate for the legitimacy of African-American Vernacular English (popularly known as Black English) as a variant of American English with significant historical and cultural value and validity.⁴⁵ Broadcasters have slowly begun to recognize accents and languages previously considered non-standard: NPR’s news shows feature commentators from Spanish-speaking Univision, and the BBC has a new West African Pidgin service—a significant recognition of the area’s large, cosmopolitan, diasporic population, and also a recognition that there are many Englishes, not just one (BBC) norm. Leading newspapers keep a rare spotlight on the potential of Spanish in Trump’s America to express dissent already by dint of surviving, changing, and thriving.⁴⁶

Cultivating language awareness and care must not require invention of new or more extensive lexicons, although in some cases—as the 2017 media reporting on climate change and sexual harassment proves—the existing vocabularies can be woefully inadequate. While it draws attention to words that do harm across registers, high and low, vertically and horizontally, language care does so not to police them, but to illustrate why they do harm and in what contexts. Its arsenal, if any, is non-propagandistic soft power that proffers occasions for changing one’s mind voluntarily. It calls for noticing when language leads astray or, conversely, when it kindles inspiration.

Part III. Orwell Is Not Holy

Much of this might call to mind George Orwell’s influential yet stubbornly unheeded “Politics and the English Language.” And in a way, it does. Divided into sections, the essay works up to the program of improvement “at the verbal end” that’s almost too familiar to be quoted:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.⁴⁷

At its core is a plea for clarity and simplicity. Self-reflexively, the agent is also the main target. Introspection and self-scrutiny are central. To this day, the essay is considered a benchmark for language care, a timeless document “squarely in our path,” “asking all the right questions.”⁴⁸ And yet, how timeless is it?

The public has changed, and language—public and other—has changed with it. Of course, many of Orwell’s dire warnings against hackneyed metaphors, meaningless words, or suspended agency, collected in a lifetime of experiencing and observing totalitarianisms and war, make for urgent reading. However, language use is predicated as much on continuities as on changes. The present-day vantage point reveals the lasting appeal of “Politics and the English Language” while at the same time spotlighting its shibboleths.

Re-reading Orwell in 2018 suggests that some of his prescriptions are part of the problem more than they are the solution. It is not simply that Orwell’s is a “joyless campaign in favour of [. . .] ‘plain English’, quirk-free and standard-issue,” as *The Guardian*’s Steven Poole offers.⁴⁹ The more significant stumbling block is a conflict within his attitudes to linguistic simplicity. On the one hand, he engages with the potential of Basic English, a radical simplification of English designed in 1929 by the psycholinguist Charles K. Ogden as his contribution to international peace. In the final analysis though, Orwell was repelled enough by it that it inspired Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁵⁰ Simplified and reductionist is Orwellian for “bad.” On the other hand, the writer’s very own essay performs some very counterintuitive pirouettes of “linguistic xenophobia” by excising borrowed words as tokens of a “slovenly” and “pretentious, Latinized style.”⁵¹ It simplifies and reduces, enacting—and, knowing the author, this takes a real leap of faith to imagine—a linguistic version of the body politic. Stealthily, purity and purism become Orwell’s own fascistic blind spots, where the lonely English-wranglers can supposedly find solace in a national, and possibly even nationalist, herd.

“There is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in the English language,” Orwell writes, in stark contrast to the passionate (at times too passionate) embrace of such borrowings by their defenders. Theodor W. Adorno admired, also not self-reflexively, “words from abroad” as “seductive” escorts.⁵² And yet, they were not merely his erotic companions. In them, the philosopher saw signs of linguistic self-consciousness and, recalling World War I-era bouts of purism, resistance against the “muddled stream” of conformism.⁵³ More than anything, they did prosthetic work where “pure” language broke down; they were reason where emotion failed: “The foreign word [. . .] flushes the outlines of knowledge, rigorous and unambiguous, out of the mass of language.”⁵⁴

The lexicon of 2016 and 2017 revealed many such red flags. On the one hand, the right-wing chant “Lügenpresse” (German for “lying press”) emerged as a clear harbinger of the initially unlikely-seeming, transhistorical interfaces between Nazism and now. On the other hand, such terms as “kleptocracy” and “kakistocracy” have been indispensable for exposing the new American government’s undemocratic, mercantilist, and nepotistic streaks. But there is another promise in Adorno’s enchantment with foreign words—a promise that Americans (and, perhaps, other English-speakers) have yet to discover. It is “the power of an unknown, genuine language that is not open to any calculus, a language that arises only in pieces and out of the disintegration of the existing one; this negative, dangerous, yet assuredly promised power is the true justification of foreign words.”⁵⁵ For this reason, much of what follows hinges on the not-so-foreign foreign words—this integral part of “our English,” the kind that was not yet Orwell’s.

Part IV. The Language Care Charter

A. Care for language

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt pointed to action as a generative force:

What I propose [. . .] is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. This, obviously, is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.⁵⁶

In the aftermath of the first space satellite’s launch in 1957, Arendt’s inspiration came from the beginnings of the space race, when it appeared that humanity was no longer earth-bound. Her philosophy of action, which emphasizes human plurality as a source, invites a re-imagining of human (despite the then-conventional designation “man”) potential through language. “Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake,” she writes, “matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being.”⁵⁷

In that spirit, we commit to the following Language Care Charter and encourage others to join us. It suggests ways to “think what we are doing,” and saying, every day. Charters are short documents, meant to be read in one breath. Of course, the following roster of points is hardly exhaustive. Rather, it amounts to an “open work” that is there not simply to be received but to be expanded, contested, or amended by those who volunteer as language activists—which, ideally if unrealistically, should include all citizens.

B. Own your language

Language is irreducible to a possession, some argue. There is “no natural property of language,” Jacques Derrida chided naive believers in its wholesale appropriation or expropriation.⁵⁸ However, it is difficult to convince people in societies that rest on individualism to tend to something that they don’t see as their own in some way.

Language ownership can take many shapes. There is no one-size-fits-all mold. Choose to nurture, as Joseph Brodsky put it, “extreme individualism, originality of thinking, whimsicality, even—if you will—eccentricity. That is, something that can’t be feigned, faked, imitated.”⁵⁹

Or else, opt for communal vocabularies, incorporating “mutuality without hierarchy” into everyday speech: cooperation, coordination, collaboration, reciprocity.⁶⁰ These words won’t summon shared realities where these aren’t in existence—language is no all-powerful force, and its ability to shape reality, most linguists concur, is notable yet relatively modest—but they will reflect and reinforce them where it is the case.

Do “fusion politics.”⁶¹ Adopt liberatory and action-oriented language; reject that which is restrictive or oppressive.

Reclaim important words that have lost their worth due to persistent “abuse of language,” as Noam Chomsky puts it. They do not have to be “vulgar propaganda exercises.”⁶² “Freedom” or “democracy” can be imbued with meanings that serve the interests of more than just wealthy elites, the political class, partisan rhetoric, or ideology.

Use caution when appropriating or parodying the opponents’ words by dint of repetition. Appropriation is a tried-and-true resistance strategy, but it can result in mortgaged vocabularies, if used exclusively.

Be skeptical about the artificial boundaries that institutions and individuals tend to draw between different types of language—private and public, or poetic and political. Audre Lorde’s “poetry is not luxury” is a dictum to live by.⁶³

C. Reflect on language

Resist “political correctness” as a frame for discussing language choices. Words have meaning, word choices matter, and applying the label “political correctness” to language attentiveness is counter-productive, stifling discussion. When accusations of “political correctness” fly, it means the accusers are trying to forestall deeper thought about the common, unquestioned words and concepts that appear in daily usage. Often, these disavow the humanity of others. There is nothing politically correct about taking care in choosing language that honors humanity in its plurality.

Fight for the words you want. Reject the words you don’t want. Have reasons for either case, and be prepared to explain it to yourself, and to others.

If a word generalizes, collapses identities, or masks conflict, think about what it is doing, what social or cultural conditions make this possible, and what exactly vanishes in its usage.

Distrust language. A convention it remains, to be sure, but a shapeshifting one. Meanings and emotions that users impute to words and phrases change constantly. Be cognizant of the changes afoot.

If a word makes you uncomfortable, sit with it. Then ask yourself why. Decide if or how to use it based on what answers emerge.

Words aren’t inherently good or bad. Users invest them with powers and connotations. Linguistic relativity, as linguists have described “a range of alternative ways in which language might have significant effects on thought,” is only meaningful in the context of human interactions.⁶⁴ When using language, consider your own biases, choices, and habits first.

Words can gang up on their abusers, commentators like *The New York Times*’ Timothy Egan imagine, and avenge.⁶⁵ And yet, they won’t do so by themselves—without humans manipulating them.

Words, or rather people who wield them, can kill. Neuroscientists have proven that verbal stress has long-term physical effects, and thinking before speaking is the best form of prevention.⁶⁶

Like appropriation, irony and snark are widespread expressions of dissent. But they aren’t tantamount to action, especially in societies where people are free to act.

To speak with Arendt in mind, words and actions ought to align. It is easy to *say* “je suis X,” much harder to *be* whatever X is.

D. Inhabit a languageverse

Acknowledge the “languageverse” in which you live—your neighborhood, city, country. Linguistic monocultures do not exist, even in settings that appear monolingual.

Think about language in both senses: as a tongue and as a human faculty. The latter necessarily implies that your tongue isn’t the only one. Language, in this case, by necessity presumes “languages.”

Question the ongoing resurgence of the term “the Anglosphere” as a designation for post-Brexit Anglophone solidarities.⁶⁷ Alliances predicated on the use of a single language, no

matter how international, exclude as much as they include. Often imperceptibly for the majority, “the Anglosphere” entrenches English-only mentalities.

How monolingual are you—and what is monolingual, really? Ideally, this ought to be the linguistic version of checking your privilege.

Train yourself to recognize the ways in which assumptions about language access and other kinds of access limit possibilities for participation, and work to open those spaces up to all. At stake are not only ethnic minority languages but also various sign languages, Braille, and even some constructed languages.

Perform small but personally meaningful acts of multilingualism within a single language, by code-switching, shifting between different speech and gestural registers, using dialect or even jargon to convey affiliations rather than exclude, relying on foreign borrowings to accentuate the message rather than show off. Speaking a single language isn’t fated to remain monolingual.

Keep an open mind about foreign words. Ask about the pros and cons of their circulation in each case. They are, as other words, indifferent—neither good, nor bad. On some occasions, they channel misplaced pathos and needless obfuscation, along the lines of Orwell’s warning—even Nazi language, it is worth remembering, had a place for them.⁶⁸ On others, they alert to the tears in the social fabric—the rifts that have not healed, precluding a given word’s full incorporation. Alternatively, they are alluring pathways into foreign worlds—and into making these worlds more than just “foreign.” “Tolerance for ambiguity,” as linguists dub this effect, has the ability to shape global citizens.⁶⁹

Consider multilingualism as a possible norm, which it had been for centuries before early modern statesmen and scholars decided that national languages were a good idea. It *is* the norm in other countries and on other continents—and on many street corners in the US.

Treat all languages equally, whether they are common or not, whether they have writing systems or not, whether they can be spoken or not. This matters in everyday agendas of education—where students increasingly choose between coding, sign language, or the living/dead languages—and communication.

Whether you are a lay user, an academic, a writer, or an editor, honor other language’s special characters and diacritical marks. The signature font or lack of experience are no excuse.

Be curious about the capacities and histories of other languages, including those used by persons with disabilities. They have a lot to teach about various kinds of struggle—as its microcosms, not merely vehicles.

Think of language and languages as more than the good-for-you pills improving your career chances, maximizing cognitive and health benefits, or boosting global mobility. Languages are essential for communication and understanding—the purposes that are never purely selfish.

Honor how others speak, and recognize what they are able to hear or feel differently because they are operating in a second language, or a marginalized language, or a sign language.

People speaking multiple languages have multiple personalities—this is not a disorder. Make an effort to meet and respect each one of them, yourself included.

Address people as they prefer to be addressed—make the effort, every time. Spell their names correctly, including using the appropriate diacritical marks and accents.

E. Honor precision

Judgements and perceptions are subjective. Still, some things do not “seem to be”—they “are.”

Moral relativism spreads linguistically. Be sparing with the word “both.”

Reserve superlatives for those rare occasions when they are indispensable.

Hyperbole is a strategic rhetorical device, not a colloquialism to use liberally.

Language, like most other things, has a history. Beware of such ill-informed clichés and descriptors as “banana republic,” “Communist dictatorship,” or even “Nazi” and the related coinages (“feminazi,” “grammar Nazi,” etc.).

Beware of platitudes: “this is not us” “America. 2017.” “This is not normal.” Such free-floating phrases can breed non-committal political detachment that passes as outrage.

Make new words if the world, or your world, changes.

Ask about grammar and the reasons to bring school grammar instruction back. It is difficult to develop critical thinking without understanding of how thoughts cohere, what renders them persuasive, manipulative, objective, or lyrical. Diagramming sentences has surely outlived its heyday, but there is more than one way to teach grammar.

Learning grammar is not about vassalage to rigid (and monolingual) rules and standards. It is about figuring out what rules can and should be broken to contribute new kinds of civic language and political expression.

Not all experiences are entitled to being conveyed in the same words. Avoid word inflation and concede to the hardest-hit the words that best describe their conditions, exercising discipline with such terms as “survivor,” “slave,” “racism,” “hero,” and others in this vein. Overuse can expropriate language, leaving those who need it the most with little or nothing.

Examine language that makes you panic, or language that evokes moral panic. In conversations about violence, specifically, ask why verbal expressions of the same phenomena trigger more anxiety when they come from one source but not another. What is behind the double standard—after all, isn’t it “words, words, words” on all sides?

F. Build the infrastructure

Attentiveness to language is no accident but a bedrock of everyday life. It coheres not in top-down mandates or compulsory training but in the encouragement to develop intimate bonds with words that children can foster well into adulthood. As things stand, the teaching of English in America is, in essence, a less-than-democratic process. By and large, it professes an inflexible approach to what is “right” or “wrong” and remains disconnected from other languages that mean a great deal to millions of Americans. The question of change, however, need not be one of sweeping educational reforms (untenable as they are at present) but of changing attitudes and taking small steps, in the spirit of chartism.

In conclusion, we offer several key changes that America’s social structures—in particular, individual families, schools and universities, churches, the media—can implement at little or no cost:







1. **Early childhood:** Play with words and accents. Use words from more than one dialect or language. Language is fun and personal; language helps develop emotional bonds and is imbued with emotion; language is manipulable—for good and bad. Children can develop a sense of this early on, with the help of intergenerational family

conversations, meeting neighbors, reading (from Shel Silverstein's poetry to #WeNeedDiverseBooks lists), or watching PBS Kids productions where other languages are spoken. Even as immersive bilingual education remains a privilege accessible to the very few, some resources are always already there.

2. **School age:** There is more than one way to write. Writing creatively—in a variety of forms—is essential for developing a connection to language and a sense of ownership of and accountability for one's words. Question the tyranny of the 3–5-paragraph essay. In addition, question an exclusive emphasis on writing. Oral storytelling matters, especially as a possible pathway to one's own roots and the roots of other cultures. It rebuilds storytelling communities, not just as they used to exist but as they can exist in the future.
3. **Adults:** Accept other Englishes, from Black English to the versions spoken in immigrant communities, as legitimate versions that have a place in all interactions. Presume that there are as many ways to speak and write most other languages that you encounter. Doing otherwise perpetuates homogenization and the burdensome and alienating rituals of ethnic and racial passing in college, at the workplace, and in the media that people consume daily. America isn't sentenced to remaining "a Babel in reverse," as a linguist put it, devouring other languages with no impact on English.⁷⁰





















Already the transitory chronicler of America's fledgling democracy Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s that language is "the first instrument of thought," thus the "influence [of] the democratic social state and democratic institutions" on language is mutual.⁷¹ Language, he suggested in a special chapter of *Democracy in America*, is a constituent of the republic, looming large among the *res publica*, Latin for "public things." Americans must treat it as such: a public thing.

Notes

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5. Marinetti et al., "Futurist Synthesis of the War" (1914), in *Manifesto: A Century of -isms*, 170–171. 
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12. Klein, "The Leap Manifesto," 267–271. [↗](#)
13. Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 13. [↗](#)
14. Guldi and Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, 125. [↗](#)
15. Gibson et al., "Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene," vii. Beyond publications, DataRefuge.org has generated comparable alliances in the service of copying and storing the imperiled government data related to environmental protection. [↗](#)
16. "Declaration of Charter '77," accessed on December 27, 2017, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125521/8003_Charter_77.pdf. [↗](#)
17. Václav Černý, "On the Question of Chartism," in *The Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel et al. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1985), 125. [↗](#)
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[Bio](#)



Yuliya Komska

Yuliya Komska is an Associate Professor of German Studies at Dartmouth College. She is the author of *The Icon Curtain: The Cold War's Quiet Border* (U Chicago P, 2015) and a co-editor of *Eastern Europe Unmapped: Beyond Borders and Peripheries* (Berghahn, 2017). With Michelle Moyd and David Gramling, she wrote *Linguistic Disobedience: Restoring Power to Civic Language*, forthcoming with Palgrave in 2018.

[Bio](#)



Michelle Moyd

Michelle Moyd is an Associate Professor of History at Indiana University – Bloomington. She is the author of *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa*. She is co-author, with Yuliya Komska and David Gramling, of *Linguistic Disobedience: Restoring Power to Civic Language*, forthcoming from Palgrave in 2018.



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